

# Breathing and Choir Conducting

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As a choir conductor, I often watch teachers conducting their choirs. When listening to choirs or seeing teachers conduct, one can ask, "Why is it that one choir is more successful than the other, even if the potential of the choirs is nearly the same?" Why is it that the audience enjoys one performance better than the other? The answer is usually hidden in the personality and qualification of the conductor. The skills involved in successful conducting are: using the arms and hands to clarify the music, beats, style, character, mood and phrasing; eye contact and facial expressions; precise upbeats and beats.

## ***Using the arms and hands to clarify the music***

Training of choir conductors is a very complex process. There are many books and DVDs about conducting techniques from which we might understand and learn lots of movements and conducting gestures.

When I have the opportunity to evaluate the work of choirs (exams, competitions), I always try to sit on the left side of the room, to follow with attention the left hand of the conductors. Many directors use the left hand to mirror the movements of the right hand most of the time. This means in most cases no added value to the music; on the contrary, the music sounds toneless and at times apathetic. The reason is

mostly not knowing what to do with the left hand.

The size of the beats depends on the passion; on the tempo and character of the music. Unvarying and equal beats lend static and monotony to the music, and occasionally break up the musical movement. The beats become audible.

A choir conductor has to know that the choir will sing the way it is being conducted. In other words, the singers will do as much as the conductor expects them to do, as much as the conductor shows them.

I often say to my students that the choir is the mirror of a choir conductor. Sitting in the audience and watching only the back of the director, I always feel and know from the way he or she gestures, what the eye contact and facial expressions are like. A viewer can follow and understand the musical events on the one hand from the eyes of the singer, and on the other hand, from experiencing the sound. It is more exciting when somebody cannot see the performers, and can only hear the voices (i.e. listening to a CD). A listener can sense the circumstances of the recording and can feel the mood of the performance. One can say "sterile" when the sound recording is over-concentrated or orderly. It sounds perfect, but not live – a musical performance can be really enjoyable only when the character and the mood are sensible and audible.

The skill of hearing the music internally; the feeling, image and musical expression – next to the conducting technique – are characteristics of the well prepared, well trained choir director. Conductors must be able to inspire and motivate the singers, and be creative. They have a background in music theory, score reading, harmonic hearing, vocal production, interpretation and teaching. And they are also knowledgeable in various musical styles and are often piano accompanists. A good conductor also has to be a good singer and know rules and techniques that make a vocal performance enjoyable.

Naturally there are also books about singing and choir voice training. But the close connection between the singing technique and conducting technique is not normally included in choral conducting teaching curriculums. The size and the force of beats, the poise of the hand and fingers determine the quality of the sound. There are many factors influencing the types of the beats, such as the size of the choir, the number of the voices, the structure of the composition, the range and register, the rhythm, the tempo, the content of the lyrics, the message of the piece, the dynamic and sounds of the text etc. The two last parameters are especially important and delicate areas of choir conducting work.

## **Dynamics**

Beginners, when they are ready, can conduct a choral work and start rehearsal with the choirs. They often say to the singers: "*Piano, piano*" or "Look at the music, there is a *forte*" – and the singers will not sing intensively enough or will even strain ... I teach my students to tell the singers "how". The words *piano* and *forte* are only graphic characters (symbols); they help to explain the composer's conception. If somebody can translate the musical notation to music (musical experience) with his/her inner hearing, that is to say that he/she feels the music, he/she has to know how to explain to the singers how it should sound; how to create the sound and how to perform the music.

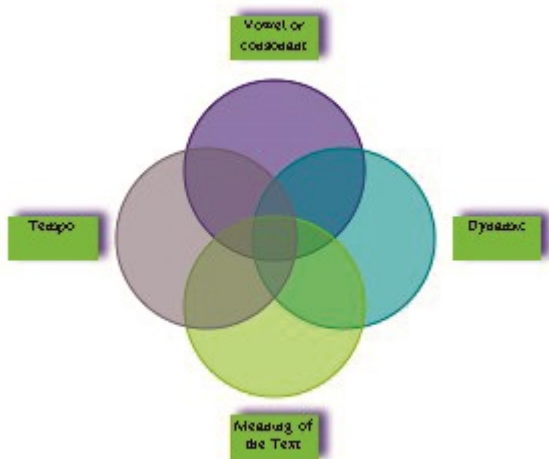
In the case of the *piano* sign, for instance, a choir director has to define how to interpret the "*p*" melody, or rather how *piano* has to sound. Singing quietly could express sorrowful, sad, intimate music, but also fear, joy, love etc. It is the same with the "*f*": singing loudly, even more keenly, intensively, energetically – singing fury, passion, majesty, or with exultant, joyful musical expression. Consequently, the good choir conductor tells the choir not what is to be seen in

the note, but how to express it.

### **Sounds provided by the text**

Choral pieces work generally with lyrics. The elements of the lyrics are vowels and consonants. They provide very important parts of the sonority of a text. A good poem is full of good sounds and helps the singer in the correct voice production. If you choose a work, first check the text of the poem – choose good prose. The choice of helpful sounds is half the success. What does “helpful sounds” mean? These are sounds which excel in using the correct formation place for singing and which need short energy releases. They could be, for instance, *p, b, m* – the voiced bilabial consonants, and the *v, f* – the labiodentals, and could also be the *d, t, n, r, l, s, z* – the alveolar consonants. The other consonants do not really help the voice to resonate in front. The fullest vowels are *i* and *e*, but *a* sounds better (more intensive). It follows that a good text consists of sounds which are formed with the same tone and in the similar place – mostly in front – of the cavity of the mouth.

By conducting, a director should know how to form the vocals starting the melody or the piece. The beats have to be different in every situation. Four components take part in the moving form: beginning a word/syllable, for instance, with a vowel (like *alleluia*) there are many beat types according the tempo, dynamic and meaning of the text.



This is a very short but extremely significant movement in conducting that is used at the beginning of every piece of music, at the beginning of new sections of a piece, and every changing section during the music: the upbeat.

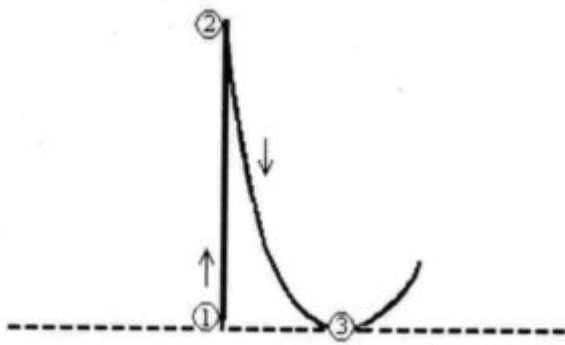
The process of the good upbeat is:

- standing in front of the choir, concentrating and raising the arms to conduct;
- waiting for a moment till every singer and the accompanist or the instrumentalist(s) are ready to begin – no movement by the conductor, with everybody concentrating;
- the 3 phases of the upbeat:

1) The preparatory beat is an arm motion upwards just before the first beat of music, that is, movement upwards from the starting point – in time, the longer part of the upbeat: nearly the full time.

2) Turning point: the dead-point before the falling of the arm.

3) The first beat, i.e. the downbeat, is the moment when the voice starts sounding – in time, very quick.



The upbeat tells the singers when and how the music is about to begin. The gesture must be given in the same character, mood, dynamic and tempo of the first phrase, attended to at the first vowel or consonant of the piece. The upbeat allows the choir to take a breath and begin singing together. This movement is bound up with the singing technique, with breathing and phonation.

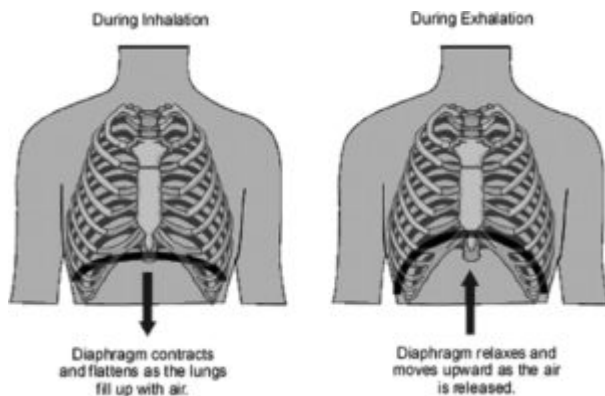
Voice training from posture and breathing to the forming of vocals, tone quality and articulation, is a very important part of choral singing. The conductor should be a very well trained singer also. It is not enough to hear the mistake or to observe the problem. It is not enough to tell the singer if something is wrong, that it is not good enough or does not fit the style – a good conductor tells “how”. Conductors should give instruction in creating and realizing the correct way. They should know the elementary functioning process.

## **Breathing**

It is important to know that there are differences between breathing for life and breathing for singing. Phases of breathing for singing are:

- breathing in (inhalation)
- setting up controls (suspension) – this is special for singers

- controlled exhalation (phonation)
- recovery – not relevant for this topic



(Source of illustration:  
<http://www.johngull.co.uk/Anatomy%20of%20the%20voice.htm>)

The inhalation and exhalation times for life are nearly the same (1:1), whereas the inhalation phase for singing is quicker and the quantity of air inhaled is greater than in natural breathing. The exhalation phase is controlled and slower. The time bears a relation to the length and intensity of the sung melody. Between the 'in' and 'out' phases there is a very brief period for the preparation of the phonation. Phonation takes place when the air rushes out of the lungs through the trachea and the vocal chords begin to vibrate. When the movement of breath meets precisely with the closing of the vocal folds, an ideally phonated pitch is sounded. This needs to be practised and learned by the singer, developing a conscious mechanism.

Contraction: the exhalation and phonation work together in the same (3) phase.

The fourth, recovery phase is a brief moment where the muscles involved in breathing and phonation relax.

The three phases in the context of upbeat and singing:

<i>Phases</i>	1	2	3
<i>Conducting</i>	Preparatory beat	Turning-point	Downbeat
<i>Singing</i>	Inhalation	Setting up controls	Exhalation-phonation

Not only at the beginning of singing is the breathing important – it is the foundation of the whole singing technique, of voice training, and it is essential in choral work also. A choral director should know where the choir breathes – even between phrases – and know how to enable the singers to do this together.

In teaching choir conducting technique, the most important, basic movement is the upbeat. A frequent fault found with beginner conductors is the lack of energy given to the downbeat. This is too late and does not give anticipatory information for the singers. When the music begins on a beat of a measure, the preparation beat itself will usually be one beat before the first sounded note. This movement might be explained by the teacher, read from books or practised in the mirror. However, together with knowledge of the physiological factors, the simplest way of communicating this is to breathe. Always breathe silently with the preparatory beat. Always breathe with your singers. The movement will be precise and the sounds perfect. The choir will always be with you.

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*Edited by Gillian Forlivesi Heywood, Italy*